

These days, bullying is a game of death

Authorities in the US have started paying serious attention to a pervasive form of juvenile behavior that has been implicated in deadly school shootings

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Off campus, Matt Cavedon doesn't mind the names he is called: helper, hero, dreamer.

Yet inside school, students for years have used uglier terms to taunt the 14-year-old, who is in a wheelchair because of a condition that prevents him from fully extending his limbs. It's bullying, he said, and it happens in different ways to children all the time.

"It just lingers on your mind," said the ninth-grader at Berlin High School in Berlin, Connecticut, who works with a group that creates playgrounds for kids with disabilities.

"You can't think clearly. You're preoccupied trying to figure out why they would say this," he said. "It can distract you from your school work, your community, even from your friends. It really does start to get to you."

Bullying was long shrugged off as an afterthought, chalked up to kids being kids. But in recent years, it has gained serious notice in the US as a factor in deadly campus shootings. More and more states and schools have taken steps toward bullying prevention, from class discussions about peer relations to reaching out to parents about the kind of behavior that is expected in school.



ILLUSTRATION
MOUNTAIN
PEOPLE

(Continued....)

Health and safety experts say that preventing bullying among children requires more awareness and intervention among adults. Some signs to watch for and ways to help:

A child may be getting bullied if he:

- * returns from school with damaged or missing clothing, books or belongings.
- * has unexplained cuts, bruises or scratches.
- * has few, if any, friends.
- * appears afraid of going to school.
- * has lost interest in school work.
- * complains of headaches or stomach aches.
- * has trouble sleeping or has frequent nightmares.
- * appears sad, depressed or moody.
- * appears anxious or has poor self-esteem.
- * is quiet and passive.

Tips for parents in helping children deal with bullies:

- * teach children to be assertive, rather than aggressive or violent, when confronted by a bully.

But health and safety officials say the country still doesn't realize how pervasive bullying is, how it hampers learning and engenders violence -- and how it can be prevented.

In response, the federal government is planning a US\$3.4 million campaign to combat bullying, drawing support from more than 70 education, law enforcement, civic and religious groups. With an expected start next year, the effort will frame bullying as a public health concern, targeting kids and the adults who influence them.

The goal is to create a culture change in which bullying is not seen as cool, parents watch for warning signs, kids stand up for each other and teachers are trained to intervene.

Among the campaign's tools are a Web site, animated Web episodes, commercials and a network of nonprofit groups to help raise awareness and offer tips.

Bullying is aggressive and repeated behavior based on an imbalance of power among people. It ranges from slapping, kicking and other physical abuse to verbal assaults to the new frontier: cyberbullying, in which kids use e-mail and Web sites to humiliate others.

Millions of students -- about three in 10 -- are affected as a bully, a victim or both, according to a 2001 study of students in sixth to 10th grade. The research was done by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development.

And that does not include huge numbers of students who witness bullying, are fearful it may happen to them and are unsure what to do, experts say.

Students such as Matt Cavedon helped shape the upcoming prevention campaign, which will focus on children in the middle-school ages of nine to 13, when most bullying occurs.

Brielle McClain, 12, a seventh-grader at Millikan Middle School in Van Nuys, California, also helped campaign leaders understand what bullying feels like. She has been

belittled for being biracial, and in turn, she has tried to intimidate other girls by spreading rumors.

"It's like a never-ending cycle," said Brielle. "It just makes you feel really bad, and sometimes really angry. I even walked out of class one time I was so mad. You don't every really get your mind off it."

Students who are bullied are more likely to be depressed and miss school, while bullies are more likely than other students to carry weapons, get into frequent scuffles and get hurt in fights, research shows.

"Bullying has been around forever, and I think the attitude among many adults is: 'Well, we survived it, and we're probably more resilient people for dealing with it,'" said Sue Limber, a Clemson University researcher who has helped the government campaign. "But if you look at research and listen to kids, there are good reasons to deal with this."

After the 1999 Columbine High School massacre, in which two frequently bullied students killed 13 people and wounded 23 others before killing themselves, the Secret Service led a study of school violence. It found that many of those who attacked others had been bullied in ways that would amount to assault or harassment if it happened in the workplace.

"You can't learn at high levels when you're being humiliated and thinking of how you're going to get your butt kicked in the boy's bathroom," said Bill Bond, a national safety consultant for school principals. He was principal at Heath High School in Paducah, Kentucky, when a freshman who had been bullied shot eight students, killing three of them, in 1997.

"The solution is, everyone involved has to have the courage to say: 'This isn't right,'" Bond said. "The biggest group that can stop it is the peers, if they just have the courage to say: 'Hey, leave him alone, that's not cool.' But you can't ask someone to tell a bully to leave someone alone unless the principal has shown the courage to take action, too."

At James Bean elementary school in Sidney, Maine, bullying has dropped significantly over the past five years, said counselor Stan Davis, a specialist in bullying prevention.

Among many other steps, the school created friendship teams, in which three students invite another one into activities to prevent the exclusion many kids dread. When students join the school, kids regularly volunteer to help them. Bullies face increasing consequences for repeat offenses but also get individual help in finding other ways to express themselves.

More parents must help, too, said Cara Mocarski of Shelton, Connecticut, whose son, Derek, was taunted, slapped and punched on a bus ride. Derek, trained in karate, did not retaliate. The bully later apologized on the behest of his appalled parents.

"A lot of parents won't get involved, or they'll say, `Not my child,'" Mocarski said. "But you can't do that. There will just be continued violence."